

Level 1 Barrework for Beginners

3. Isometric grand pliés, relevé

Video Demonstration

The Finis Jhung Ballet Technique Level 1, Barrework for Beginners, Exercise 3

Music

New Ballet Music 7, Track 2, 3/4, adagio

Before you teach this exercise please read the supplementary material which follows The Exercise

The Exercise: *(performed on a portable barre placed parallel to the mirror)*

- 1. Stand in a double-wide second position facing the barre. Place your arms in 2nd position on the barre.**

Musical Introduction:

- 2. Over the 4 count musical introduction, check to see that you are in “Number 1” and that you can bounce off your heels.**

Remember to breathe! Inhale to prepare, exhale to exert

The first set of 8 counts:

- 3. Over counts 1 to 8, slowly work into an isometric grand plié.**

Begin by gripping the floor with your feet

Slowly pull your body down towards the floor so your knees bend

Stretch up the back of your neck

Feel the muscles working in your feet, ankles, knees, and hips

Turn your legs out from the hips

The second set of 8 counts:

- 4. Over counts 1 to 8, slowly raise yourself and straighten your knees.**

Press your knees down and out over your toes

Pull your inner thighs together

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Turn out the tops of your legs

Keep your knees in line with your toes

The third and fourth sets of 8 counts:

5. Repeat the exercise.

6. Without moving your feet closer, push down so you rise on half-toe (demi-pointes). You are on relevé. Balance. Slowly lower your heels. Rest. Relax your muscles.

Pause.

We will now repeat the exercise standing sideways to the mirror. Have your students turn to the L so that they are looking over the R shoulder.

1. They will plié with their arms en bas.

2. They will keep their head turned toward the mirror through the first grand plié.

Don't lift your ribs up and forward

Don't let the pelvis tilt forward and down

Don't let the tailbone stick out

Keep your knees in line with your toes

Don't let your feet roll in

3. After they complete the first plié, have them turn their head to the L to relax the neck muscles.

4. Have them return their head to the mirror and repeat the plié.

Pause.

Now have them turn around so that they repeat the entire exercise looking over the L shoulder.

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The isometric plié

If you're going to pirouette, you usually begin from a plié in fourth or fifth position. If you're going to relevé to a pose, you begin with plié on one leg, or fondu. If you're going to jump, there's a plié before and after. We can't dance without the plié.

The demi-plié initiates and completes almost every movement we make. Consequently, the plié is the most important and the most difficult movement to execute properly. The plié is ballet.

My first serious ballet teacher, Willam F. Christensen (affectionately called Mr. C) often said, "You know, your legs bend and they straighten. They bend and they straighten. That's it."

How right he was. Adding on to Mr. C's straight talk, I teach pliés emphasizing HOW the legs bend and straighten. It is important for students to grasp the mechanics of the plié so that they will strengthen their feet and legs and body as they work.

When you dance, you:

1. Bend your knees
2. So you can push the floor with your feet, which will
3. Straighten your legs and cause you to either
4. Stand on flat, rise onto half-toe or full pointe or leave the floor and spring up into the air
5. As you execute a balanced pose, turn, or jump

We all want to have a plié which will power us strongly and safely as we begin and end our movements. With correctly executed pliés, we can dance with ease and avoid injuries to the feet, ankles and knees.

I think every plié should be done in such a way it builds strength and balance. The only way that will happen is to make the muscles in the feet, legs and body work.

In order to do this, you must eliminate the idea of assuming static positions and become more involved with the movement process.

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HOW is it possible to move with maximum muscular involvement from a standing position with both knees straight to a plié position with both knees bent? HOW do you move with maximum muscular involvement from that plié to stand with both knees straight?

The answer is to use opposition. You will resist, or oppose the movement. You will make your plié isometric.

What makes the isometric plié distinct is that there is no intentional or deliberate bending of the knees and lowering of the body into a static position. I tell my students, “Don’t make pictures when you dance. Don’t suddenly assume a position. If I want to see a picture which doesn’t move, I’ll go to the museum. Give me the movement. I want to see HOW you bend and straighten your knees. Give me the action.”

With an isometric plié, you don’t want your body to go down; you don’t want your knees to bend.

Concentrated work to develop an isometric plié is best done in the grand plié in a double-wide second position. Standing like this with feet far apart gives you a better idea of using energy that is equal and opposite.

I tell the students that when they are preparing for the isometric grand plié, they should resemble a triangle: the three points are the head, the right foot and the left foot. Energy radiates outward from the center of the body through these three points. Energy up through the crown of your head resists the downward pull of your feet.

The isometric plié begins at the floor. Your feet grip the floor in order to pull the body downward. This forces the knees to bend into a plié position. Think of doing pull-ups when you’re hanging from a barre; your elbows bend because you’re pulling your body up. Or, you can go to the wall barre and pull away from it (as you do my Kitchen Sink stretch). As you pull yourself toward the barre, your elbows bend. The isometric plié works exactly like this.

In the upward movement of the isometric plié there is no deliberate “pulling up” of the body and straightening of the knees.

Instead, you slowly begin pulling your inner thighs together while pressing both knees down and out over your toes. This action straightens the knees and makes the body rise. This simultaneous pulling and pushing will make your feet and legs strong.

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Learning to make all your pliés isometric will build a path of energy from your toes to your head and enable you to move with power and grace.

Here are some important keys:

1. The plié is the cause that creates an effect
 2. The plié is a verb, not a noun. It's an action, not a position
 3. The plié always has to be "worked." It is never a relaxed movement unless you're told to do so for stretching purposes
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How Finis coaches students through the isometric plié

Stand in a wide second position (at least two foot lengths apart). Your body should resemble a triangle. You're going to stretch up through your head with energy that equals what you put into your feet and legs.

You are going to do the most important plié of your life. I call it the isometric plié. Isometric means that you are going to use opposing muscles.

I don't want you to relax into a picture-position. Your knees will bend into the plié position because your toes are going to pull your body downward.

Watch yourself in the mirror as you do this plié. Your feet grip the floor and your knees are beginning to bend. But if you look at the top of your head, you don't see any discernible drop in height, or any jerky movements. Your knees are moving outward but you don't see a downward movement. That's because the energy you're using to stretch up with is equal to the energy you're putting into both feet. The energy is always equal and opposite in three directions: head, R foot, L foot.

You're stretching up the back of your neck and trying not to bend your knees. You feel a stretch in your hips as your legs move away from each other. You're pulling in your stomach muscles tightly. You're trying to keep your pelvis up.

The isometric plié is hard work! You can feel all your muscles engaged: from your toes through your ankles, the outside of your lower legs, your knees, your thighs, your hips, up the front of the body and the back of your neck.

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You continue to move through this slow motion plié until you see your hips are on the same level as your bent knees. You are now in grand plié.

Now change your thoughts. You don't want to come up out of the plié. You're pressing your knees down and out over your toes. You don't want them to straighten. You slowly engage the muscles at the very top of the insides of your legs. You're trying to bring your inner thighs closer to each other. You're pressing the floor with your feet. Slowly, imperceptibly, your knees straighten, and you realize you are standing as you began, in the triangle position.

The isometric plié is "invisible" movement. On count 1, you are standing with straight legs and on count 8, you're in grand plié, but you never saw the downward movement. The ascending movement is also "invisible." You're in a grand plié and 8 counts later you're standing in the triangle, but when did it happen?

Make all your pliés—large and small, two feet or one foot, slow or fast— isometric. Then, you will always have a plié which will not only empower you more than you ever thought possible, but will also protect you from injury.